

FLYOVER COUNTRY

I. [If You Stay Long Enough]

Here is my only life—a hymn pushed into my tongue like weld screws—
the pulsing of a cricket inside a crow's mouth.

For me, this flat land has held so much weight I'll collect its fragments—
the gospels of vacant parking lots, the quietude of the single-lane

dirt roads, where off to the side a new family watches their firstborn
play in a sandbox on the edge of a cornfield where possums have gone

to die alone in the husks while we go on existing. Dying alone is a privilege
of privacy and here you can have it without any artifice—

no tall churches and taller skyscrapers—here you can exit like waking
to the chilled spring where ice sloughs off the evergreens

and the shimmering reminds me of church bells and the acorns
unearth themselves amid the same dead colored leaves

that went on living a buried life keeping the garden bed warm. No place
is sad if you stay long enough, and if you stay long enough,

come visit the last used bookstore that holds the yellowed almanacs
and historical indexes on pallid steel shelves layered with dust,

the loud dreams of farmers whose voices can still be heard, even seen,
their clothes billowing like flags strapped to a thin clothesline,

taut and bouncing over the steep sea of buffalo grass. How else do I give
names to the wraiths of a landscape? Here, harsh versions

of man's machinery tread through every year. Between each season,
a space opens up and the sun unlocks a door in the ground

with its brightness, and if you let your ears become a clump of roots
and burrow the soil you'll hear beyond the voices.

You'll hear what solitude sounded like before it was alone—
a speck of dirt has a body from which it hollers fervent and raw.

II. [Of Motherhood, A Fierce Drowning]

The incessant silence of the central Midwest drove my mother mad—between the gaps of noise, the crescendoing wind like public trains passing rows of terraced houses in crowded cities—there was no peace for her. She has never seen the land from any different angle, having lived only in her parents' house and the house next door for fifty-eight years. To not move like that means to measure dust by the buckets of light casting shadows on the wall each day until an invisible voice seizes the skull and a landscape of zoysia invades the soft ground—infertile seeds of motherhood and identity. When a life grows this small, turns this rough, everything attacks it—the skinny arms of the gingko in our backyard, the gnarled fingers of the sweet gum dropping its dangers around the house like traps. They were only trees swaying in the pale light of a blank bedroom wall but it was like a wave that threatened to drag her under, and did, eventually—a gentle rocking, then violent thrashing, her depression a fierce drowning between the slab lots of two houses that have settled forever at the bottom of Springfield, Illinois. Sometimes, when her eyes stay open and she can't sleep, she will ask *Do you hear the bells, the windchimes*, she hung when she was nine next door at her parent's house. *They're still ringing*. How comforting, I think, then how terrifying.

III. [Long Day of the Factory Belt]

And what of my father who lost his father at nine?

Every day after he threw a baseball at a church wall,
across the street from the only apartment he ever knew,
playing basketball on the sloped hill of a parking lot

with other lost kids on the North End, until he moved

in with my mother in the only place she ever knew,
and together, the two of them compared the only geographies
they believed in.

When he thinks of this, his eyes open up like a haymow

on a barn rotting away with owl nests and mice skulls.
This was his descent into the incinerating
pleasure of normalcy—

work and bars, work and bars—long day of the factory belt hangover.

How many days has he risen and questioned
the different versions of himself pinned to clotheslines
where the wind flattened, smoothed, and beat

the wrinkles out? I believe it was hard for him

to reach into a closet almost too small for his hands
and pull out a routinely painful, uniform version
of himself, like removing an arm from a bush,

finding it scratched by thistle and covered in cockleburrs he pretends

don't hurt. When I look into the landscape behind his eyes,
I believe it was too much for him to sludge every day
through the sedge grass shadowed

with sycamores and elms where littered white plastic bags

floated through like ghosts,
snagging on felled branches—those are the whites of his eyes.
It took me a long time to accept this,

but his wife is asleep in a bed that is falling into the ground

and I will never understand his fear. Compassion
is awareness of the ineffability of another's fear—its different shades,
and there is honor in the weathered crumpling of his face.

IV. [The Taste of Copper]

When I had a loose tooth, my father yanked it out with a wet rag.

Bloody at its root, he set the tooth on the counter,
said *Keep it as souvenir*.

He left me alone after,
went to visit my mother in the hospital,

and I ran outside to plant my tooth
among the rotting AandR train tracks
behind our house, dismantled and stacked.

White clover blossoms were growing all around the scrap
burning with the kind of rust that stained my hands orange.

I believed if I planted my teeth they would grow into white clover.

I shivered
as the wind entered through my sleeves.

I was barefoot and dirt caked my heels.

The taste of copper was drying in my gum's black socket,
as if I had just licked a battery.

It was cold
and the white clover blossoms chattered
and flinched.

I laid down in the grass on my back.

I thought this was what it was to turn invisible—
the fleshy ends of white clover chewing the edges of my skin,
swallowing me into the dirt—

face up,

while the sky tries to remember the ground below.

V. [To Sever Anything]

It is always winter again and the gutted deer hang
from their hoists and gambrels and lose their blood in the snow.

Sometimes the blood is in my hair. Sometimes my hair is on fire
and I'm singing to you with dirt in my mouth. I have no winter

boots so my tennis shoes are wet with slush. The snow
sounds like a jaw grinding its teeth in a very quiet room

as I walk away with the knife in my hand to try and sever
all that makes me my father and my mother and these states

crooked and flat with nothing in them and no one important
until I decide that's not true. I don't want to sever anything.

But I have to walk back to the deer hooked and hanging
with its legs spread like a drunk man leaning out of a car window

with his arms splayed and his eyes rolling back into his head
as he tries to see the sky one last time before the blackout.

This deer. This beautiful thing I'm slicing and dressing
and all this blood on my hands with my nails so deep in blood

they look filled with dirt. So cold and I'm wiping running snot
from my nose with smeared blood and the sounds of my skull

sucking it all back in are making a song, giving me the only life I know—
this longing quiet and the way I love this knife in my hand.

VI. [To Riven Stillness]

The first time I heard my friend say *flyover country* I had no clue I should have taken offense, but I was young and rising five days a week to work at a parking garage with relapsing alcoholics and sex offenders who tried to offer me advice in the form of cocaine knotted tightly in the cellophane from a cigarette box. I wanted to stay there forever because I wanted what was familiar and what was comfortable to remain the same. I was dumb, too, and I thought every place was the same then, whether in Iowa or Indiana, even Missouri or Ohio. All their drugs were the same—a vacant parking lot and a shaking of hands. All the bread lines were the same too, smelling of antiseptic with twelve-inch TVs holding auxiliary cables in with Scotch tape, the linoleum tile gone gray under a thin layer of dust and scuff, black streaks from the chairs scooting, and canned food stacked like tin pillars piled next to cracker boxes inside laundry baskets. And it was at a bread line somewhere outside of St. Louis—its frowning arch far off in the distance of clouds—that I let a homeless man sell me baking soda in a ziplock bag because he needed the money for a life out of his control. My friend and I wanted a free meal before driving across state lines with a pound of marijuana under my old baby blankets in the back of a station wagon. We got a deal on the pot and wanted to sell it and keep driving. We both talked like we had a little too much hope. I made a phone call and quit my job and we drove on. That night, the moon was as thin and yellow as a toenail clipping. Everything was quiet and free and it taught me how to riven stillness out of any given place. No two spaces are alike, and it made sense when we pulled off at a rest stop. We sat at a bench, stared up at a passing plane. The lights on its wings were flashing, and it was pulling the clouds over the moon like a stage curtain. I looked over at my friend and he was lost, watching the moon and the planes. *They're just looking down, right here, calling us flyover country.* He said it soft. He seemed like a person who had just been profoundly affected by the sudden return of a lost memory—

VII. [Renders and Yields]

When the speck of dirt sings from its fallow field abandoned
by harvest and covered with frost, a boredom emerges in that cold
time and patience is tried. It's like watching an icicle melt, drop by drop,
from a gutter only to freeze again on the old porch
black from the fall's unswept leaf rot. I have spent lifetimes inside
watching a house being dismantled and rebuilt out of sunlight
and freezing temperatures, but this is how I learned patience,
how to control my burning, the way switchgrass looks
like a scalp of hair on fire nodding back and forth in the wind.
When the thaw begets spring and a vastness unveils a roadside ditch,
a green rectangular population sign counts the number of people
within its small city limits in Illinois where farmers thresh the wheat
and the windmills go on pushing the clouds away from the sky
to let the light down on the water towers that look like giant golf tees
poised and waiting for any benevolent hand to swing the weather
and scythe them across green waves. When the dirt sings,
a field of birds scatter in an unrecognizable pattern and mystery is tilled—
the sky widens out from the ground and vanishes inside of itself—
such soft violence renders and yields this truth—each place is different
in its hum, in its upward reaching fields. It dares you
to misunderstand its song. It dares you to misunderstand the perfect order
of this prairie's flailing, wild flutter.